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First Soviet space shuttle is said to be 'identical to ours'

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When the Soviet Union launches its first space shuttle — an event expected this year according to those who monitor Soviet space developments — don't be surprised if it looks just like U.S. orbiters.

"We've seen the Soviet orbiter and it's identical to ours," said retired Air Force Lt. Col. Thomas H. Krebs, former chief of the Defense Intelligence Agency's space systems branch. "An unclassified Defense Department report," he said in an interview, "stated that the Soviets could test their shuttle in the mid-to-late 1980s. The report also said a scale-model has already been tested several times.

"It was easy for the Soviets to get hold of the plans because the space shuttle was unclassified," said Col. Krebs, now a consultant living in Springfield, Va. "Anyone could buy a set of blueprints." He held up a book on sale at the National Air and Space Museum — "The Space Shuttle Operator's Manual" — and asked, "Can you imagine being able to buy a book like this in Moscow about Soviet space hardware?"

"We built our magnificent space shuttle at the cost of over \$7 billion after years of research and development. The Soviets have chosen a much quicker and cheaper way to achieve the same capability. They merely copied, then improved on our design."

During the Soviet tests, Australian Navy observers were able to photograph the scale-model space plane after it splashed down in the Indian Ocean. The Soviet model looks like a small American space shuttle, he said.

Western reporters in Moscow got the first official confirmation that the Soviet Union was developing a reusable space vehicle from Roald Sagdayev, an official of the Soviet Academy of Science.

Mr. Sagdayev denied that the Soviet spacecraft will resemble U.S. orbiters, but aerospace industry

sources say the Soviets have long relied on copying aircraft produced in the West. The most famous case was their supersonic transport plane, the Tu-144.

Moscow was proud of having one of the only two SST aircraft in the world — the other being the British-French Concorde. Against the advice of its designers, who knew it had not been fully tested, the Kremlin showed off the plane at the Paris aviation show in 1973.

When the Soviet plane arrived, spectators were amazed to see that the Tu-144 was an exact copy of the Concorde — droop snout and all. Aviation Week and Space Technology immediately dubbed it "The Concorde-ski."

There was no exchange of technical information between the designers of the Concorde and the Soviet Tu-144, so it was obvious the Soviets had stolen the technology.

As it turned out, the materials and design of the Tu-144 were inferior to the British-French Concorde. During a flight demonstration at Le Bourget Airport, the Soviet SST stalled, went into a deep dive, its left wing fell off and the plane disintegrated.

The crash, which killed the Tu-144's crew of six and seven persons on the ground, was a major

blow to Soviet prestige.

Despite design improvements, the Soviet SST never became a success. Scheduled flights between Moscow and Central Asia were canceled without explanation, and a year ago Pravda reported that Tu-144s were no longer in service.

Intelligence sources believe that Soviet spies now are after the plans and designs for the U.S. "aerospace plane" that could revolutionize military and civilian transportation by carrying passengers between London and New York in a hour. Research for the new plane — a highly classified joint venture between the Defense Department and National Aeronautics and Space Administration — is expected to cost up to \$500 million.